

Memo from
JOSHUA LEDERBERG

To: Bob Merton

C

NOV 9 1971

Thank you for digging this up.

(RKM's
review '68)

"How's Honest Jim?" does pick up some of the egregious idiosyncrasy of Watson's style. I think it fair to say that this is not typical of most of the work in molecular biology, nor indeed of most of his work. He must have well realized that the painstaking laboratory work of Wilkins' group would have culminated very shortly in the solution of the DNA structure; Watson and Crick even had the advantage of being ~~less~~^{less} durably committed to ultrastructure^{work}, and therefore freer to emit what might prove to be premature speculations, i.e., they had the freedom to be less responsible. But the scientific ethos imposes a troublesome ambivalence -- of admiration for a remarkable 'coup'; on the other hand the sense that this style of operation will erode the motive to do the hard work (a la Wilkins) which is the sine qua non of major conceptual advances. So Jim may also be mocking a distorted reward structure that overemphasizes the strident heroic advances.

Some of this shows through in his remarks about trying to outwit me at the interpretation of my own data. What he does not elaborate is that while (in the situation he pictures) I was way off base --and between 1955 and 1958 rather stubborn about adhering to an untenable hypothesis -- his own contribution was even further off track, and merely added to the confusion.

The Double Helix is a very personal view, and within certain limits, remarkably candid. I have

been appalled that it is depicted as the authentic picture of the research career.

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